



Brazile & Gillespie: Congress Can Expedite the Presidential Transition

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For most Americans, the morning after a presidential election has been decided represents a moment of relief. Relief that months of campaign commercials, debates and a seemingly endless stream of canvassers knocking on their doors and phoners interrupting their dinners are finally over — relief at the end of a long and exhausting process. However, for the election winner's staff, that morning is the official beginning of a stressful and complicated process that can make or break the new president's first two years in office.

Having worked on presidential transitions, we both know the pressures facing transition staff. There are only 11 or 12 weeks between Election Day and the inauguration, too short a period to prepare for the host of challenges facing incoming administrations. This is especially true in our post-9/11 security environment and in times of economic uncertainty, which demand a seamless transfer of power and leave us no room for a gap in national leadership.

That is why, in recent elections, candidates have begun planning their transitions informally before winning election. While these efforts are almost never spoken of out of fear they will be derided as presumptuous, they have become as important to the process of transferring power as the formal transition following Election Day. To their credit, both President Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) engaged in transition planning before the election was held in 2008. President George W. Bush also deserves praise for making a smooth transition out of office a high priority during the final months of his term. None of these steps was mandated by law, and all pre-election transition efforts by candidates had to be funded privately.

It was fortunate that, in the first transfer of power between parties after 9/11, with two ongoing wars and the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, both major candidates and the White House took it upon themselves to ensure one of the smoothest transitions in modern history. But we should not simply leave something so important to fortune.

Sens. Ted Kaufman (D-Del.) and George Voinovich (R-Ohio) have introduced the Pre-Election Presidential Transition Act. This bipartisan legislation would extend to both parties' nominees some of the government services (i.e., office space, secure computer systems) currently provided to presidents-elect for their transition planning several weeks before Election Day. It also authorizes funding for sitting presidents to help plan for a responsible transfer out of office and recommends the Bush administration's Presidential Transition Coordinating Council as a model.

This will go a long way toward removing the stigma of presumptuousness that discourages early transition planning. We now know that in 2008 the Obama and McCain campaigns were poised to make a joint statement acknowledging that both were engaging in pre-election transition planning as an act of responsibility. However, at the last minute the issue became politicized and neither campaign wanted to risk being accused of “measuring the drapes” in the White House.

This political calculus is understandable but dangerous in today’s world. The Kaufman-Voinovich bill was written in consultation with veterans of past transitions. Its introduction follows on the heels of a landmark report by the nonpartisan, nonprofit Partnership for Public Service as well as academic articles by presidential scholars Martha Joynt Kumar, Terry Sullivan and others analyzing the successes and shortcomings of recent transitions. The Pre-Election Presidential Transition Act would provide nominees with office space, computer services and information about previous transitions. It would not pay transition staff salaries or provide for the hiring of outside consultants. For those expenses and others not covered by the bill, it would allow candidates to open transition accounts to which they could raise money or transfer funds from their campaign chests.

For those of us who have worked on presidential transitions, this bipartisan effort by two outgoing Senators in a non-presidential election year is long overdue. Congress should take advantage of this opportunity to implement the changes proposed by this bill to ensure more responsible, more secure and more seamless transfers of power in the future.

Ed Gillespie is a former counselor to President George W. Bush who worked on the transition between Bush and Barack Obama. Donna Brazile managed the Gore/Lieberman campaign in 2000.